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History of the Bethel Literary and Historical Association, by W. A. J., Founder's Day, 1901

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Founder's Day, 1901.

BETHEL LITERARY AND HISTORICAL
ASSOCIATION.

W. A. J.

For the Wilberforcians.

I.

"Nor love thy life, nor hate; but what thou livest,
Live well; how long or short, permit to heaven."

What can a single life accomplish? What influence for good or ill? How wide spread? How long continue to be felt?

In writing of Charles Sumner, the poet says:-

"Were a star quenched on high,
For ages would its light
Still travelling downward from the sky,
Shine on our mortal sight.

Thus when a great man dies,
For years beyond our ken,
The light he leaves behind him lies
Along the paths of men.

We meet tonight on the anniversary of one who tho dead,
still lives in the life of Bethel Literary and Historical Association; Whose influence still pervades her every pulse
throb; for the institution that he founded honors and reveres
his name.

It shall not be the purpose of this paper to give or attempt to give an exhaustive history of the organization or even to sketch that history with any degree of thoroughness, but it shall rather hint at or make mere mention of efforts and incidents in the life of the organization, most of which may be found more in detail in an excelent history of the organization written several years ago by Mr John W. Cromwe

or in the records kept by the successive secretaries, to which the author is indebted for much of his information herein recorded. ~~contained~~

November 9, 1881, almost twenty years ago, Bethel Literary and Historical Association was projected in old Bethel Hall which still stands across the street in the adjoining square. Its organizer was Bishop Daniel A. Payne. At its beginning, the life and guidance of the institution was intrusted to Mr. R. J. Smith, as president, Misses A. E. Geary and A. R. Bowen as vice presidents; Mr Chas. Shorter, Sec. Miss C. A. Patterson, librarian; Mr Wm. Beckett, treasurer; and an executive com. consisting of Messers Freeman, Hardy, and Johnson, and Mess Bush and Miss Nickens.. Some of these have since passed away, but others are still with us, among the latter Miss Mattie R. Bowen still holds an office in the Society after tow decades of continuous official service; ~~and~~ that she has been found indispensable to the society is a high testimony to the integrity and endowment of Miss Bowen and proves that popular favor is not always vascillating in its character.

From the records before mentioned it may be learned that the first subjects before the society for discussion were of a strictly historical and literary character, searching, as they did, into the origin and accomplishments of the Ancient

(Ancient) Egyptians and the Ethnological relationship existing between the Egyptians and the Ethiopians. They delved also into the lore of the African Tribes and sought to untangle the skein of ZULU racial connection.

Rich indeed were the feasts set before those gathered about Bethel's weekly board. Inspiring were the bouts witnessed by those who watched her skillful knights in their weekly jousts. Darring beyond question were some of those knights, for who but a bold cavalier would attempt to show the Hand of God in America", a task undertaken by Mr. Jesse Lawson. The fire of enthusiasm burned brightly on the hearth of Bethel Literary, shedding its warmth and its glow on all who came within the charmed circle of its light.

Among the masterhands that contributed much to its renown were such men as Rev. Upshaw, Rev Waring, Mr. Lewis H. Douglass, George Downing, Richard T. Greener, Calvin Johnson, Mrs. M. S. Cary, Prof. Gregory, Dr. C. B. Purvis, Dr. Crummell. the Hon. Frederick Douglass and others whom the world has paused to hear and for whom Fame has built a niche in her memorial hall.

There was also a class of younger champions, then just training in arms, constant witnesses of the battles of the giants, who delighted when opportunity offered, to deliver a telling blow and get away before one of the great warriors

could launch his spear or wield his mighty sword. Among these, and they have been made worthy knights by this training, were P. N. Bailey, E. J. Waring, E. M. Hewlett, R. H. Terrell, A. F. Hilger, Dr. F. J. Shad George W. Cook, W. H. H. Hart, and Prof. Kelley Miller, who now has the honor to preside over this body.

Before the first year had passed, the Literary had grown so in favor, as a popular forum, that its success was assured, and it attracted to the arena the best brain of the ~~National~~ National Capital, nay more, it stopped not at such narrow confines, for the returning missionary told the wonders of unknown lands and savage tribes, the traveller recounted strange adventures, and the diligent student burned the midnight oil distilling the choicest sweets from the springs of classic knowledge that he might have something new and interesting to place before Bethel Literary..

It was in this arena that the lamented J. C. Price was first presented to a Washington audience and captivated ~~with~~ by his grace and eloquence of speech.

Judge Whipper, Wiley Lane, Dr. Augusta, J. H. Smyth, B. K. Bruce, John M. Langston, J. H. Durham, have been parties to its hotly contested but bloodless battles. Champions entered and retired victors and vanquished, with hearts as stout and weapons as artful as ever graced a gladiatorial combat. Unlike the Roman arena, to be overthrown here was not to be trampled under foot.

but rather to be taught those lessons, which if heeded, would at some time in future place upon the now defeated brow the laurels of victory.

Clean hands and a knowledge of one's subject-matter combined with an ability to use the weapons of intellectual warfare are all that Bethel Literary has required of her champions, but woe unto him who came without these.! A Bishop tried it and he has never had the courage to reappear; an ~~em~~ eminent meteorologist from the U.S. Weather Bureau tried it, but the fog and mist in which he endeavored to obscure his argument were scattered by the tempest of the onslaught from his critics, and the learned meteorologist went out in a storm.

In course of time the administrations changed but the work of the society went on and the little stone cut out of the side of the intellectual mountain of the District, was rolling and gathering momentum and weight at every revolution. Dean succeeds Smith as president to be followed by Mr Lewis Douglass, J.W. Cromwell, James Storum and George Arnold. Here the society turned aside from the beaten path of its course and placed the sceptre in the hands of a woman, electing to the presidency Mrs. R.H. Terrell. With this change, however, came no ebb ~~of~~ the interest ~~on~~ in this popular arena and its fame and influence were spreading ^{even} wider. Dr. Blyden exploited the Mohamedan Religion, Miss. Hallie Q. Brown portrayed the "Divine Art" Thought" was investigated,

"The Civil Service" analyzed "The Evolution of Man" ~~verified~~.
 and the "Future of the Negro" was definitely settled and
 spread out before us as an open book. The only woman, living
 or dead who ever received a vote for President of the U.S.
 , Belva A. Lockwood, asked a question which some of ^{us} are yet
 waiting to hear satisfactorily answered, - "Is Marriage a
 Failure"?

About this time there came a revival of literature as ~~so~~
 such, and we spent ~~whole~~ evenings with Whittier, and Tenny-
 son; "The Art of Reading" was discussed by Librarian Spofford,
 and practically demonstrated by Warman of Chicago, until
 all "nature" seemed to "picture" for us a new departure" in
 the realm of "Literature". Art was criticised from the
 standpoint of a layman "Reconstruction reviewed by Ex-Gov.
 Pinchback and others who passed through those perilous times.
 The Spirit of Reform" was investigated, Dr. Bowen gave a New
 Question for a New Century"; and the late Supt. Powell
 showed the "Simplicity of the English Language"? diplomatic
 and constitutional questions claimed attention and Drs.
 Montgomery, Grimke, Waller, and Jennifer entered the lists with
 one or another of the burning questions of the day, while
 ever and anon, the thunderous applause, the wilder commotion
 or the bated breath told that the gladiator of gladiators,
 Bethel's Prince of Orators, the Sage of Annacostia was

again in the arena.

From the shoulders of Mrs. Terrell the mantle fell upon R.S. Smith and was later assumed by E.A. Clark, L.M. Hershaw and Prof. W.H. Richards who followed in the order named. Each put forth Herculean efforts to improve upon the well nigh unapproachable past, and to lift higher the standard of an organization whose colors, during the twenty years of existence, have never trailed in the dust. So new features have been added to the program from time to time and we have been taken on voyages to all parts of the world, we have been shown the pleasures of sea sickness and the mysteries of Paris, we have had "symposiums," and "composiums" in the midst of which some of the audience have frequently taken a little "reposium."

Often during these years the Society has paused in silence and in sadness to drop a tear upon the passing remains of some loved knight, who in her tournaments had kept bright his armor decked, perchance, with numerous favors and and laden with trophies of many victories. Such an one was our loved and lamented Nestor, The Old Man Eloquent, Hon. Frederick Douglass.

To the ranks there have also been acquisitions of such men as Booker Washington, T. Thomas Fortune, Rev. J. Albert Johnson ~~and~~ the Hon. John P. Green, and other scholars of national reputation. Some are coming, some are going, and Bethel has

had ever at her command the best talent of the land and so has moved steadily forward with "cheers for the living and tears for the dead". She has allowed retrogression in neither the quality nor the quantity of her presentations and with them from time to time she has mingled harmonious strains of sweetest music, vocal and instrumental, thus at once edifying the mind and delighting the soul of the listener as she enveloped him in a symphony of resonance and reason.

How more than blessed is he whose efforts gave to a community an organization so potent for good, so wide in its influence, so lasting in its results. Thus the soul and spirit, the will and work of Daniel A. Payne live on in and through the institutions that he founded and fostered.

Perhaps the two institutions which bear most indelibly his stamp and seal; that have reflected most faithfully the ideal which he set before them at their dedication, and about which his affections were most solicitously twined, are Wilberforce University in Ohio, and Bethel Literary and Historical Association in Washington.

Had he done nothing more in his lifetime than found and mould these institutions, he would need no monument to perpetuate his memory, no record to prove his greatness; no eulogies to proclaim his worth.